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Though the proportion of dropouts in the U.S. is slowly diminishing, the number of dropouts during the present decade is expected to soar unprecedentedly. Of twenty-six million young people who will go from schools into the labor market, 7 and 1/2 million will be dropouts, and 2 and 1/2 million of the dropouts will have had less than eight years of schooling. Until recently the dropout had been counted on to fill a large demand for unskilled labor, but the world in which dropouts today seek entrance has been drastically changed. Automation is demolishing whole categories of low-skill jobs, and creating only jobs requiring high levels of academic background. The dropout problem will not be solved by national proclamation or practices based on national policy statement; instead, local, detailed research is needed to establish programs geared to the needs of the participants in each locality. In New York, it was found that dropout rates tend to run higher in rural and large city schools than in suburban schools, and that dropout rates are related to the occupational status of students' parents. New York has initiated the School to Employment (STEP) Program to smooth the transition from school to work for youngsters who intended to quit, but who are without skills to bring to the labor market. Project ABLE was undertaken to develop latent talent among low socio-economic and culturally deprived youngsters, with emphasis on remedial reading instruction, guidance for parents and youngsters, cultural enrichment and team teaching.

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The Scope of the Dropout Problem

— An Educator Looks at the Dropout Problem —

Daniel Schreiber
Director of Project: School Dropouts
National Education Association

The school dropout problem has become national in scope. And, in the fashion of the furor that followed Sputnik, it has focused widespread and vocal attention on education, and particularly on the educational plight of the underprivileged. President Kennedy himself has set the tone in defining the new frontiers of educational challenge:

> "Ignorance and illiteracy, unskilled workers and school dropouts — these and other failures of our educational system breed failures in our social and economic system: delinquency, unemployment, chronic dependence and waste of human resources, a loss of productive and purchasing power and an increase in tax-supported benefits."

Nothing is plainer, however, than that the general situation of which the dropout problem is a part is exceedingly complex. Granted the tremendous advances in education that have been made over the years, it is rather impossible to hold the schools altogether responsible for our present multifaceted crisis. Perhaps there is a distinction to be made between "educational systems" and "schools" — the former signifying what we think ought to be and the latter what actually we allow to be. Our schools are, by and large, at any moment, what our society wants them to be; and I would guess that, rather than being scolded for having failed, they are being encouraged to extend exploration into hitherto relatively unsounded areas.

Indisputably, the burden upon the schools increases daily; yet, as we become more complex, this is almost inevitable, given their crucial location and function in our society. It is difficult, for example, to conceive of any present societal institution more likely to provide means for long-range solutions. But the schools' capacity for action in this area will be much dependent upon as precise as possible a delineation of education's relationship to the deep social and economic imbalances the President has enumerated.

My intention here, then, is to recapitulate in briefest outline a few of the social and historical origins of the present dropout problem and, if possible, to illuminate some of their implications for our educational system. Following this, I shall review briefly and comment upon some of the specific responses that have been made within the State of New York.

Origins of the Problem

Abstractly, dropout is perhaps an intrinsic problem in an open democratic society where the crucial purpose of education is to ensure an informed and responsible citizenry. But, whatever we may think the problem is, dropout is no recent phenomenon. Moreover, and this is rather ironical, the past half century has witnessed a steady and quite impressive improvement in the retention rates of American schools. In 1900, for example, not more than six or seven of every 100 ninth grade students graduated four years later. By 1930, this proportion had risen to one-half; at present it stands at about two-thirds. Yet there has never before been a dropout problem.

Now nobody would attempt to credit all this improvement to the schools; though they have surely progressed tremendously. Indeed, as much as to efforts by the schools, this steady improvement in retention rates owes to such social and historical factors as the rise in educational requirements for employment (as technology advances), the spread of child labor and compulsory school attendance laws, and a growing general affluence which has permitted more parents to afford to see their children through school.

And evidence tends to indicate that truly effective attempts to ameliorate today's "dropout problem" must be founded on as just as possible an appreciation of the social and historical forces which have forced it into being. Permit me to sketch in a few of them.

To begin with, while the proportion of dropouts is slowly diminishing, their number during the present decade 1960-1970 is expected to soar unprecedentedly. Altogether some 26 million young people — the post-War II "baby boom" come of age — will pass through the schools and into the labor market. Short of tremendous contravening efforts, 7.5 million will be school dropouts; 2.5 million of these will have had less than eight years of formal schooling.

Nor is the problem simply the number of dropouts. Until fairly recently the dropout has been counted upon to fill a generally continuously large demand for unskilled labor. In brief, the essence of the dropout problem is neither their number nor proportion, but the fact that the world into which dropouts drop, and to which they seek entrance, has drastically changed.

The argument most consistently offered in explanation of our present crisis is the simple one that our economy just isn't producing enough jobs. This argument has two bases: (1) The economy is moving at nowhere near its full production potential; and (2) automation develops at an incredible pace, demolishing whole categories of low-skill jobs and creating only jobs requiring high levels of academic background. It has

been estimated that during this decade an average 60,000 new jobs weekly need to be created to replace those made obsolete by automation and to accommodate new entrants to the labor market.

We participate in a national economy whose rate of unemployment has not fallen below five percent in more than 70 months. But let me indicate a few of the educational implications of this crisis.

1. Workers with less than a high school education comprise about five percent of the country's technical and professional personnel; about one-fourth of the clerical workers (most are women); and about one-third of the sales workers, managerial and official personnel, and proprietors.

On the other hand, about 80 percent of the Nation's farm laborers and private household workers never finished high school; three-fifths of the service workers and three-fourths of the generally unskilled workers are "old" school dropouts.

2. But not all these people are employed. For two-thirds of the country's unemployed are men and women with less than a high school education.

3. The rate of unemployment among all youth 16-21 years old generally runs two to three times that of the entire labor force. But among school dropouts in this age category, it averages 25 percent; and, as Dr. Conant has shown, in slum neighborhoods in great cities, it rises to as high as 70 percent.

Nor is the problem static enough so that it can be conceived of as principally an urban one. It's seldom noticed that it is sometimes our rural areas (there, incidentally, dropout rates are as high as in the cities) and small cities and towns that are most devastated by the pace of technological development. Eighty-five percent of the country's population growth during the last decade took place in urban areas. Very few agricultural states, for example, grew in population commensurately with the country as a whole. The United States Department of Agriculture states that by 1970 not more than seven percent of the labor force will be engaged in producing a more than adequate food supply for the entire Nation; and, consequently, 90 percent of the youth presently growing up on farms will eventually have to migrate.

The plight of these displaced farm laborers or small city factory workers as they cross the thresholds of the industrialized cities can only be suggested here. In great part, they are poor, with little education and with few marketable skills. Many are young with small children. Many — I have in mind particularly the southern rural Negro, the Appalachian Mountain White, the Spanish American (Puerto Rican and Mexican-American) — having been abruptly dislocated from ancient agrarian styles of life, are often dispossessed of all really operable sense of continuity and identity. Large numbers are eventually doomed to welfare rolls; and their children, in the city slum schools, are immediately earmarked as what we call "potential dropouts".

Finally, in a very broad perspective, dropout — and the dropout problem — seems nothing so much as one more characteristic of the plight of that segment of our society which is "in" our society, but only

marginally "of" it. Professor S. M. Miller of Syracuse University, for example, estimates that at least 70 percent of the pupils who quit school come from families whose annual income is less than $5,000. Similarly, wherever dropout studies are made with racial contrasts, it is found that dropout rates among minority youth — Negro, Puerto Rican, American Indian, etc. — run considerably higher than among their white counterparts.

Implications for the Schools

The implications of all of this for education are obvious enough, perhaps; though the scale of the challenge is surely forbidding. There is imperative need for a higher level of education throughout the country, both to endure adequate operation of increasingly complex democratic processes and, in a sense, to hold the consequences of technological development within scale. Particularly, there is an extreme danger that large segments of our population, who were previously destined to low-skilled and unskilled jobs, might awkwardly develop into a new "caste" of permanent unemployables.

Yet, although it is undeniably national in scope, it is difficult to imagine that the dropout problem will be "solved", by national proclamations or even by practices based on national policy statements. For it is, as are most educational problems, an extremely concrete and localized problem. This much was evidenced during the past summer in the national "Stay-in-School" campaigns sponsored by the National Education Association and the U.S. Office of Education. The NEA "Each One Reach One" drive encouraged teachers throughout the country to contact at least one potential dropout over the summer and attempt to persuade him to remain in school. The USOE campaign involved the distribution to 61 school districts of one-quarter of a million dollars from the President's Special Emergency Fund to enable special efforts by guidance counselors also to persuade potential dropouts to return to school. The point I want to make, small as it may seem, is that, while each of these campaigns was initiated on the national level, their actual work involved the specific efforts of specific teachers and counselors confronting specific dropouts in specific locales. It seems to me that with a problem of this sort there is no substitute for each locale undertaking active responsibility for its own situation.

In this respect, on almost every level, New York State has taken exemplary leadership action.

New York State

A first step of any action design, for example, will be as complete a research survey as possible. In New York State, this is a continuous activity. It is possible, for example, to know the dropout rate for each year and for each class; e.g., only 71.3 percent of those students who entered the ninth grade in New York State schools in September 1958 graduated four years later in June 1962. It is possible to know rates of dropout, separately, for each county, each school district. The importance and usefulness of such statistics when combined with other data cannot be overstated.

A model of such a combination of statistics and other data is the report on the State Education Department's six-year Holding Power Project by James W. Moore. Based on a random sample of schools throughout the State, it illuminates a variety of configurations and indices which are bases for immediate action and suggestive of directions for further exploration and experimentation. Let me cite only a few examples:

1. Schools with class populations of 100-200 students have proportionately higher retention rates than those with smaller and larger classes.

2. Dropout rates tend to run higher in rural and large city schools than in suburban schools.

3. Dropout rates are significantly related to the occupational status of students' parents; i.e., the higher the average occupational level of students' parents, the higher the schools' retention rate is likely to be. Similarly, tendency to dropout is proportionate, both to student's "educational appreciation" and to their parents' expressed judgment of the "value" of a high school education.

Mr. Moore's study indicates, further, the reasons generally given for dropout (by counselors and school authorities, on the one hand, and by the dropouts themselves, on the other); when (during which months, proportionately) it occurs; the academic background of dropouts and their academic potential (IQ) compared with those of stay-ins. Such characterological indices, and the recommendations that can be deduced from them, are the necessary preliminary foundations for subsequent action.

Equally important, I think, are the kinds of research studies the New York State Division for Youth has recently made in Syracuse, Buffalo, and Rochester. I understand that similar studies are in process in at least four other cities. Here the purpose is to obtain as detailed as possible an idea of the identity (within school and outside) of dropouts in a particular locale, to establish a solid base on which to erect in-school and out-of-school youth and work training demonstration projects, and on which to effect modifications within the curriculum program itself.

Let me cite and compare some of the results from these three studies, to indicate some consistently salient features of dropouts and also some of the kinds of variations in identity that invariably crop up from community to community:

In Buffalo and Rochester, e.g., the average age of dropouts was roughly 17.5 years; but, in Syracuse it was only slightly over 16.5.

In Buffalo, 59 percent of the dropouts had IQ's in the average or above average range; in Rochester, 55 percent; in Syracuse, the mean IQ of dropouts was 92.8.

In Buffalo, 59 percent of the dropouts were retarded at least one year; in Syracuse, 57 percent were retarded at least two years.

In Buffalo, the median grade attained by dropouts was 9.6.

In each of these studies, moreover, an attempt was made, through examination of the records of those youngsters who had registered with the New York State Employment Service, to determine the employment characteristics of the dropouts.

Programs

The importance of this sort of local, detailed research is in its significance to the establishment of programs which are, as much as possible, tailored precisely to the needs of their clients or participants. There are no pat, ordered panaceas to the dropout problem; and, in fact, a latent source of tragedy in all "stay-in-school" campaigns is that the dropouts will return to find that business is continuing as usual, that the schools will have made no attempt to rectify what the dropouts had found impossible about them. Even in the instance of proven styles of programs, it invariably proves necessary that modifications be made to accommodate local peculiarities. This is not the place even to suggest the range of kinds of programs, in operation or in planning, in the schools of New York State, which are intended to alleviate the school dropout problem; but I would like to review and comment on two kinds of efforts that are sponsored by the New York State Education Department on a state-wide basis.

STEP (School-to-Employment Program), which now operates eleven units in seven cities throughout the State, has the objective of preparing for employment students clearly intending to quit school, but who have no marketable skills. Each unit involves 15 to 20 fifteen-year-old youngsters who are not yet eligible to leave school. They are helped to get part-time or half-time jobs in public, tax-supported agencies. In Ithaca, for example, participant youngsters work in the Youth Bureau and the public library; in Yonkers, they all work at jobs within the school system. They are paid from funds specially provided by the State.

The students continue to attend school on a half-day basis. They attend a carefully selected class or two, or receive individualized or small-group instruction. In each case, the program's coordinator tries to devise for each youngster a program tailored to his specific needs and potentialities.

The objectives of the STEP programs are immediate and practical: to smooth, as much as possible, the transition from school to work for youngsters who plainly intend quitting, but who are without skills to bring to the labor market. Under the best of conditions, there will always be great need for such programs; yet they are at most corrective, since they deal with youngsters at a point where, from certain perspectives, their situation is all but irretrievable.

Another approach is represented by Project ABLE. Initiated in 1961, it consists of school demonstration programs, on all levels (kindergarten through grade 12), in 16 New York State school districts. The purpose of these programs is to discover and develop latent talent among lower socioeconomic and culturally-deprived youth. Every ABLE project emphasizes expansion of remedial reading instruction and of guidance and counseling for parents and pupils, team-teaching, and cultural enrichment.

The effort in Project ABLE is to grapple with those educational roots of the dropout problem which have their source in facts of socioeconomic condition and of what is called "cultural deprivation". The impetus behind Project ABLE makes part of a developing philosophy which is presently known as that of "compensatory education". As partial definition, let me quote from a bill, entitled "Special Compensatory Education Programs for Culturally Disadvantaged Children", which was passed unanimously last spring by the California Legislature:

> "It is the intent and purpose of the Legislature to encourage the establishment and development of programs by local officers and agencies of the public school system directed to identifying those pupils affected by language, cultural and economic disadvantage who are potentially capable of completing the regular courses of instruction leading to graduation from the public elementary and secondary schools, and by special services, techniques and activities to stimulating their interest in intellectual, cultural and educational attainment."

The hope of such programs, including those of Project ABLE, is to make acceptable to their participants, through education, the mainstream of the American cultural experience.

For the crux of the dropout problem is not simply that so many sink, but that so many have never learned to swim.

Project ABLE has been in operation too short a time for significant results to have been accumulated. However, let me quote a few results of the high school performances of students in New York City's Demonstration Guidance Program, the prototypical program in "compensatory education":

- Among the 329 Demonstration Guidance Project students who attended George Washington High School, the rate of dropout was 22 percent. This is one-third lower than the rate for the city as a whole and far lower than the rate of George Washington High School.

- 108 of these students received academic diplomas. In the three preproject years, only 43 graduates of Junior High School 43, who subsequently attended George Washington High School, obtained academic diplomas.

- During the three preproject years, the highest academic standings attained by graduates of Junior High School 43 at George Washington High School were 51, 65, and 226, respectively. In the project years, some graduates of Junior High School 43 stood among the top ten of George Washington High School's 800-900 students.

  In the class of 1960 they ranked number 1, 4, 6.

  In the class of 1961 one ranked number 4.

  In the class of 1962 they ranked 2, 4, 9.

Such results, it seems to me, are all the justification required for "compensatory education"; they indicate the direction in which the dropout problem can be — <u>has to be</u> — triumphantly overcome.

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